Pro-life vs pro-choice in Belarus

On 3 October 2016, women in neighbouring Poland went on a nation-wide strike protesting a notorious law criminalising abortion. This ongoing controversy has also provoked public debate in Belarus.

Unlike Poland, Belarus does not infringe on women’s reproductive rights. Its legislation guarantees the right for every woman to decide on motherhood herself.

However, since late September, the Belarusian media have been actively discussing the pro-life and pro-choice standpoints. These debates reveal that society remains divided on the issue of abortion.

Is Belarus turning pro-life?

In 2013, Belarus revised its abortion legislation, yet it still remains very liberal in comparison to Poland; women can decide for themselves whether they want to become mothers. Current laws allow abortions until up to the 12th week of pregnancy. Under certain conditions, such as rape, it is also possible up until the 22nd week of pregnancy.

Since the 2000s, the number of abortions in Belarus has declined steadily. According to the National Statistical Committee, the current abortion rate in Belarus is about 24.7 abortions per 100 live births. This is a significant improvement compared to 2000, when the rate was 128.7 abortions per 100 live births. Belarus's neighbours display similar trends of declining abortions.
Since 2014, psychological consultations have been a requirement for all women who wish to terminate their pregnancy. Currently, such counselling leads to around 20 per cent of women changing their minds about having an abortion. Doctors in Belarus can also refuse to perform the procedure, reserving the right to redirect women to a different medical professional.

Concerned about the negative demographic trends and low birthrate in Belarus, the state also supports other pro-life initiatives. Besides counselling, it has introduced incentives for families with children and sponsors awareness campaigns. For instance, in 2015, the National Programme of the Demographic Safety of Belarus organised events such as “a week without abortions” at selected hospitals across the country.
Facing the choices

In the pro-life camp, Belarusian conservative forces have been teaming up with religious institutions to protest abortions. In recent media debates on abortion, the Belarusian Christian Democrats in particular have reiterated their uncompromising position as the country's major pro-life advocates.

On 23 September 2016, Volha Seviarynec, married to leading Belarusian Christian Democrat Pavel Seviarynec, publicly shared her personal story about deciding against having an abortion under circumstances in which a majority of people would have opted for one.

During the 12th week of pregnancy, Volha’s child was diagnosed with a serious genetic disease known as Patau syndrome. Even though doctors strongly advised them to terminate the pregnancy, the couple refused. After the birth, their child survived for only eight days. Volha acted in this ordeal according to her faith, and her going public with the story sent a powerful pro-life message.

A few days later, tut.by published a series of interviews with Anna Gerina, coordinator of the charitable organisation Genom. The foundation was established by the families of terminally ill children with rare genetic neuromuscular diseases. Anna’s story is also a tragic one, as she turned her life around fighting for her daughter Yana, diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy at the age of eight months.

According to Gerina, there are no statistics available on the number of people suffering from this disease in Belarus. Moreover, the country does not have a single doctor
specialising in such cases as her daughter’s. The life expectancy of these children remains low and the state does not invest resources into programmes that could help them.

Anna too believes in God, yet she is on the pro-choice side. In her opinion, no mother with prior knowledge of the diagnosis would consciously choose to give birth to a child with this kind of genetic disease: “It is not for the sake of the woman, but for the sake of the child.”

**Why abortion?**

According to Sviatlana Prakapenka, chief of the maternity centre in Polatsk, two of the major reasons for having an abortion in Belarus are social and material insecurity. For many, it still remains one of the main forms of birth control, as about 50 per cent of unplanned pregnancies end with an abortion in Belarus.

Husbands and partners often shy away from responsibility, refusing to take part in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. Thus, the woman alone bears the pressure of family planning.
The Belarusian media regularly report gruesome cases of discarded and abandoned babies. Just recently, on 19 September, a 28 year old mother dropped her newborn daughter down the garbage chute of a residential building in the Minsk suburb of Machulishchy. The child, who was just three hours old, miraculously survived falling from the seventh floor.

Hospitals still do not offer baby-boxes, which could help save the lives of unwanted newborns and give their mothers a way out. On 21 September, the newly elected Belarusian parliament declared its intention to discuss introducing such an initiative, which already exists in Russia and Ukraine. Civil society activist Nasta Dashkevich pointed out that along with baby boxes, the state could also guarantee the right to anonymous childbirth, ease adoption laws, and foster a more child-friendly mentality.

However, presidential decree Nr. 18, adopted in 2006, might obstruct the baby-box initiative. It imposes certain obligations for women considering leaving their newborn in the care of the state: she must reimburse the costs of the child’s upbringing and education. Thus, women with low incomes are more likely to choose abortion over preserving a life.

Offering counselling for women who are considering terminating their pregnancy remains a short-term fix. In the long run, the state should invest resources in promoting a healthy lifestyle and responsible family planning. Demystification of modern hormonal contraceptives could also help women avoid difficult choices. Ideally, these topics should also become a part of the educational system.